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History 133c

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Source Exploration- Hoyerswerda Riots of 1991

* Summary of Events: The series of Xenophobic attacks in Hoyerswerda, a small town in north-east Saxony, Germany, now known as the Hoyerswerda Riots, took place from September 17th to the 23rd in 1991(Wikipedia, Hoyerswerda Riots). An estimated 500 neo-Nazis stormed the last international refugee center, smashing windows, firing off tracer rounds and tossing Molotov cocktails. Many townspeople looked on and did nothing. The riots were so intense that the police decided to close the center and relocate the refugees because they could not control the violence (Schofield, 2014) even after arresting 83 people. Happy residents later appeared on TV proclaiming their town “ausländerfrei“(foreigner free). The term later became Germany’s 1991 *Unwort des Jahres* (Un-word of the year) because it became synonymous with the riots (Wikipedia, Un-word of the Year (Germany)).
* New York Times Archives- I searched “Hoyerswerda” and got 10 articles since 1990. None from then till 1975 and those from before are of no significance, just have the name mentioned. Most relevant:
* “Violence by Bands of Racist Skinheads Stalks East Germany”-David Binder, August 20th, 1990.
  + West German TV report on the far right estimates 30,000 mostly young people are engaged in militant nationalist politics in east Germany.
  + Most skinheads are young factory workers. Hostility directed at “un-German” people (political leftists, blacks & other foreigners, Jews and homosexuals).
  + On May 1st, in Hoyerswerda skinheads attacked a group of workers from Mozambique.
  + Author, David Binder- foreign correspondent in Berlin in 1961. Reported on building of Berlin Wall. Wrote three books on Germany, one titled “Children of a New Fatherland. Germany’s Post-War Right-Wing Politics” published 1999. (Wikipedia)
* “A Wave of Attacks on Foreigners Stirs Shock in Germany”-Stephen Kinzer, October 1st 1991.
  + Similar attacks in 20 German towns (buildings housing foreigners). Response to increasing number of immigrants from Vietnam, Mozambique, Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Belief that foreigners are taking jobs, apartments and government subsidies belonging to Germans.
  + Hoyerswerda- “depressed eastern town”. Gangs of youths attacked 2 apartment complexes with foreign workers as residents. Hundreds looked on. 83 arrests but police unable to control violence, so 230 foreigners (Africans and Vietnamese) rushed out at night on busses to an army base. Residents later appeared on TV proclaiming their city “foreigner free”. Hoyerswerda made headlines because it marked the 1st time political leaders gave in to far right demands regarding foreigners.
  + Mentions “Die Welt” front page editorial on same day as publication. “There is a profound connection between the riots in Hoyerswerda and the election results in Bremen. Politicians must resolve this situation and very soon.” I looked for this on Die Welt’s website but archives only go back to 1995.
  + Bremen election results- SPD went from 51%(1987) to 39% (1991). SPD advocates liberal policies towards foreigners.
  + Not the last incident. In Leipzig, refugee houses surrounded. City later moved 240 Romanians out for their safety.
  + Poll this month (Sept. 1991) found 21% of East Germans and 38% of Westerners have some sympathy for “radical rightist tendencies”.
  + Most foreigners in eastern Germany (~200,000) are Vietnamese and Mozambicans brought there under former communist government, during which they lived in isolated apartments. Were resented by locals for their freedom to leave the country and access to western goods.
  + Conservatives blame violence on joblessness and homelessness of youths, but police reports found that many youths arrested for assault of a foreigner were both employed and had apartments.
* “German Neo-Communists, Surging, Capture a City Hall”- Stephen Kinzer, June 26th, 1994
  + In Hoyerswerda, 51.6% of the vote for major went to a former East German Communist. Every other party supported his SPD opponent.
  + Many analysts assumed the Communist Party would die quickly after unification, but recent elections show surge in eastern states.
  + Recap of October 1991 events (wrong, September).
  + Mentions most recent attack in May (so May, 1994), Magdeburg- 150 skinheads beat Africans and Turks.
  + Recap of Hoyerswerda history- Population of 7,000 when East Germany was founded in 1949. Communist officials decided to expand it into a “model city” to house employees of a giant coal and gas company built nearby. By the end of the 60s, population had grown above 70,000. Many of the people brought there were engineers, technicians and other educated specialists. Nearly all were members of the Communist Party.
* “For Germans, a Kebab Filled with Social Significance”-Stephen Kinzer, New York Times, June 25th, 1996
  + quotes from social scientist Eberhard Seidl-Pielen- “For many Germans, the doner was their first contact with foreign culture. Turks who sell doners gave them their first chance to see foreigners in a role other than refugees or asylum-seekers.” “This is especially true for east Germany. Take a town like Hoyerswerda, where there were terrible racist riots a few years ago. Now there are 15 doner stands there, and you don’t hear anything about attacks on foreigners. There is a connection. The doner has definitely helped calm Germany down. It has changed the face of the nation.”
* Stephen Kinzer- wrote 3 of the articles above, but didn’t publish any books on the topic. Now works for the Guardian. Was posted from 1990-1996 in Germany, where he was the chief of the NYT bureau in Berlin. (bio on his website)
* Eberhard Seidl- German sociologist, journalist and editor. After his studies of sociology, he worked as a freelance journalist from 1982-1997. From 1997-2000 he was an editor for the Taz. (Wikipedia, Eberhard Seidel-Pielen)
* “Poor Economy is Driving East Germans from Home”- Kevin J. O’Brien, May 28th, 2004
  + Former East Germany enters 14th year of double digit unemployment, jobless residents emigrating west.
  + Since the fall of the wall, eastern Germany had shrunk by 3.1 million residents (13.6 million as of this article’s publication).
  + In April (2004) unemployment 18.8%(east) and 8.5%(west).
  + Hoyerswerda- nowhere is population decrease more visible. Lost 39% of its residents. Fell from 72,400 in Dec. 1988 to 44,165 now. Unemployment rate 23.5% in April. Over last 3 years the city demolished 3,000 apartments. Catch-22 situation: as population decreases, so does annual budget. For every resident lost, budget loses 1,500 euros.
  + Crucial factor for Hoyerswerda- modernization of biggest employer, the Schwarze Pumpe complex. Before unification employed 18,000 and now (2004) ~1,000.
* To get current articles, I searched Bing News for “Hoyerswerda” and found articles from the Wall Street Journal, the Miami Herald, the Seattle Times, etc. All recent were on the arrival of refugees in Hoyerswerda. All were published in either January or February of 2014. This one from the Seattle Times had the best information.
* “Fading German City Sees Hope, Threat in Arrival of Refugees”-Matthew Schofield, February 15th, 2014
  + Summarizes events of September 1991.
  + Story from 2012: 8 young men chased home a couple that had been tearing neo-Nazi stickers off light poles and bus stops in Hoyerswerda. Attackers staked out the couple’s apartment. Police arrived and suggested the couple move.
  + Mention a 2006 neo-Nazi rally in the town.
  + Pastor quoted in the story insists the expected 120 foreign refugees won’t have to deal with aggression.
  + Germany to take 10,000 Syrian refugees, more than the rest of Europe combined.
  + Recent projections predict population of Hoyerswerda to decrease from current 35,000 to 23,000 by 2030. Average age is 49 (2014).
  + An anti-refugee Hoyerswerda Facebook page has twice the amount of likes as a pro-refugee page.
  + Privately many fear that if the center is threatened the police will again stay out of the way.
  + “We are better prepared than last time.” –Stefan Skara, the lord major.
* Taz.de Die Tageszeitung- you have to pay to use the older archives but you can see the titles and a little of the text of articles that match your search. I searched “Hoyerswerda” under “title” and came up with articles with names like
  + “Hoyerswerda im Belagerungszustand” (24.9.1991)
  + “Hoyerswerda: Die Täter sind frei” (2.27.1992)
  + “Hoyerswerdaer Polizei sah nur ‘ruhestörenden Lärm’” (3.19.1993)
  + “Hoyerswerda müht sich um ein neues Image” (2006)
* Die Welt- I searched “Hoyerswerda” and interestingly enough, one of the first articles was about the aforementioned 2012 incident in which neo-Nazis harassed a couple in their home. There are several more articles from 2012 about the incident but this is the latest one. The second gives details on the original attack. I included these because of the continuing problem Hoyerswerda has with neo-Nazis.
* “Polizei in Hoyerswerda rät Nazi-Gegnern zur Flucht” 11.15.2012
  + Police criticized for advising a couple harassed by neo-Nazis to leave the city. Spokesperson said “it’s easier to move 2 people from a town than watch 30 people or have 5 police officers guard a house.”
  + The couple invited the hate because they ripped neo-Nazi stickers down around the town.
* “Keine Erinnerung, ‘ich war rotztütenzu’”- Jörg Schurig, 1.14.2014
  + On October 17th, 2012 a couple’s apartment was surrounded by 15 hooded figures. The couple immediately had the feeling the group were neo-Nazis. They continuously rang the doorbell and shut the power off. They called for the “Antifa-Sau” (anti-fascist sow) to finally come out.
  + The couple moved away to an unspecified location.
  + 8 were brought to trial, with only 3 admitting to having participated. They stated they were too drunk to remember the incident.

Final summary: Hoyerswerda was a small town of less than 10,000 up until 1949 when East Germany formed and government officials decided to build it up in order to house employees of a large coal and gas company that controlled the nearby Schwarze Pumpe energy complex. Most of the people moved in were members of the communist party, which helps explain why Hoyerswerda become the first German town, post unification, to elect a former Communist Party member as mayor in 1994. By the late 60’s, Hoyerswerda had grown to a town of over 70,000. The communist party hired foreign workers who were resented by the German population for their ability to leave the country. After unification the power station was modernized and its employees dropped from 18,000 to 1,000. Unemployment skyrocketed and young people emigrated to the west at one of the highest levels in the east. The population dropped to around 35,000 with unemployment in the double digits. When the riots happened in 1991, the town was economically depressed. The German population resented the still present foreign workers who were housing was paid for by the government. Xenophobic attacks had been happening around Germany at this time but Hoyerswerda marked the first time police gave in to neo-Nazis’ demands and removed the foreigners because they simply could not get the situation under control. While this was not an isolated incident in Germany, it wasn’t even an isolated incident for Hoyerswerda. Hoyerswerda experienced frequent neo-Nazi activity from 1990 all the way up until today. After the riots, the name “Hoyerswerda” became synonymous with xenophobic violence. The town is currently trying to shake the reputation by bringing refugees in, but there is still pushback from some citizens who are anti-foreigner. The future of these new refugees is not yet determined. Thus the story of xenophobic violence and right-wing extremism in a declining eastern German town continues.

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